FOREIGN TRADE UNDER THE HAN

Under the Han the natural barriers which tend to separate China from the rest of the world were being overcome by both Chinese and foreigners. The era was one which favored commerce. Not only had the Han brought prosperity and territorial expansion to China, but elsewhere powerful states were an assistance to trade. In what is now Northwest India and Afghanistan some of the Yiieh Chih had established a kingdom under the Kushan dynasty. The Parthian Empire occupied most of what is now Persia and the region immediately north of it, and in its cities Greek merchants were to be found, deposits of that eastward wave of Hellenic culture which had come with the conquest of Alexander and was only slowly subsiding. Since the last century or so of the Chou, states with Greek rulers and with strikingly Greek features had borne witness to that conquest on its Indian and Central Asian frontiers. Still farther west the Romans were unifying the Mediterranean world. In what is now the southern part of European Russia were various divisions of the Sarmatians, and here, too, on the shores of the Black Sea, were Greek cities, centers of trade. Throughout much of Asia commerce was more extensive than it had been before. Merchants passed across Central Asia into China by routes which skirted the northern and the southern slopes of the Tarirn River basin. They also came to the Han Empire by way of the South—up the rivers of what is now Burma and across the hills into the present Yunnan, and, by the longer sea route, to the south coast. For a time the main port in the South was in the future Tongking, then

under the control of the Han. It was not until later centuries that it was supplanted by Canton.

China's commercial contacts with the peoples on her far western frontiers were, when the distance is considered, fairly extensive. The Han knew the Yiieh Chih and the Parthians, not only by trade but by political embassies. It seenis probable that merchants from India and Ceylon found their way to China by the southern routes. The Chinese, moreover, were aware of at least the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, calling it Ta Ch'in. With the Mediterranean world they had little, if any, direct contact. Trad-